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THE NEW TESTAMENT IDEA OF THE FUTURE LIFE

IV. THE FUTURE LIFE IN THE JOHANNINE TEACHING

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The Fourth Gospel takes the form of a historical narrative; and the evidence which it affords as to the life and teaching of Jesus is possibly of much greater value than many modern scholars have been willing to admit. According to the view that has become prevalent in the most recent criticism,¹ it is a composite work, recast and supplemented by a later writer, but resting on a document which must be dated considerably before the end of the first century. For our present purposes, however, the many and complex questions which constitute the "Johannine problem" may be disregarded. Whatever may be the elements of authentic tradition contained in the Gospel, it is now granted by the most divergent schools of criticism that the historical material has been subjected to a theological process. The Evangelist looks back upon the life of Jesus in the light of subsequent reflection, and gives us not so much a literal report of the events and sayings as an interpretation, in which he makes use of various conceptions that lay outside of the immediate scope of our Lord's message. We are thus justified in speaking of a Johannine theology, to which the teaching of Jesus, as we know it from the synoptic records, has been assimilated. In our estimate of this theology we have to take into account not only the Fourth Gospel but the so-called Epistles of John, which certainly originated in the same religious circle, although the question as to identity of authorship is still in dispute.

One fact appears to stand out clearly, the more we examine the theology of these Johannine writings. It is based, in all its essential features, on the teaching of Paul. The Pauline theology is

¹ Wellhausen, *Das Evangelium Johannis*; Spitta, *Das Johannes-Evangelium*; Wendt, *Die Schichten im Vierten Evangelium*.

not, indeed, reproduced as a whole; and some of its most important factors are altogether neglected. Pauline ideas are blended throughout with others, derived from the Alexandrian philosophy, and are further modified by a peculiar religious mysticism. But the cardinal conceptions by means of which the thought of Jesus is interpreted are ultimately borrowed from Paul. We have here the explanation of much that would otherwise remain obscure in the Johannine doctrine of immortality.

Before considering this doctrine in its several aspects, it is necessary to remind ourselves of the needs and conditions to which it made appeal. Christianity had now cast in its lot definitely with the gentiles; and to the Greek world the ideas of Jewish apocalyptic were entirely foreign. We have already seen how Paul's message of the resurrection had been received at Corinth with doubt and misgiving. In the intervening years the difficulties which he encountered had become accentuated. Those conceptions on which the Christian preaching had originally based itself—the Messiah, the Parousia, the judgment, the raising of the dead—belonged to a world of thought that was wholly Jewish. They stood for hopes which could have little meaning for an alien people in a later age. It was the task of the Fourth Evangelist to lift Christianity out of the apocalyptic setting, and to express its permanent message in more adequate and intelligible terms. Even when the earlier conceptions are formally preserved, a new significance is attached to them. The Messiah is identified with the eternal Word, the judgment with an inward process of self-determination. All the beliefs which the primitive age had been willing to accept literally and realistically are now resolved into their spiritual essence. The Christian message is not replaced by another, but is only translated out of the language of apocalyptic into that of pure religious thought.

In his new statement of the doctrine of immortality the Evangelist takes his departure from the teaching of Paul. The earliest Christianity had looked forward to an enduring life which God would bestow on his people in the kingdom that would presently be fulfilled. Paul held to the accepted hope of the kingdom and the resurrection, but combined it with the idea of a super-

natural life which is even now imparted by the indwelling Spirit. In the Fourth Gospel this Pauline idea of life becomes central, and the hope of the kingdom is merged in it altogether. Christ appears no longer as the destined Lord of the kingdom, but simply as the Life-giver. "In him was life" (John 1:4). "As the Father hath life in himself, so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself" (John 5:26). In virtue of his divine nature he possessed a life which was the same in kind as the life of God, and he came that he might communicate it to men. They could enter into such a fellowship with him that they would abide in him as the branch in the vine and participate in his life. The one aim of the Gospel is to bring men into this quickening relation to Christ. "These things are written . . . that believing ye might have life through his name (20:31).

In primitive Christianity the new life had been conceived as something to be given hereafter; and this view persists even in the thought of Paul. He regards the flesh as a "body of death" from which we must be set free before the work of the Spirit can come to its own. But to the Fourth Evangelist the life imparted by Christ is a present possession. "He that heareth my word . . . hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation but is passed from death into life" (5:24). "He that believeth in me hath everlasting life" (6:47). The great transition is effected, not by death, but by the act of faith in Christ—an act which involves the mysterious experience of the "new birth." This, as the Evangelist conceives it, is more than a moral regeneration. The man who is "born from above" undergoes a complete change of nature. The Spirit takes possession of him, and transforms the mere earthly life into something different in kind. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the spirit is spirit" (3:6).

Like Paul, therefore, but in a manner still more explicit, the Fourth Evangelist regards the new life as a higher essence, which takes the place of the natural life. It manifests itself in works of love and obedience, and above all in a true knowledge of God as revealed in Christ (17:3). But in the last resort it is a new kind of life—the heavenly, spiritual life as distinguished from the

earthly. For this reason it is described by the constant epithet "eternal." The life which we have by nature is transient and finite, but through Christ we obtain a life which cannot end, because it is indestructible in its very substance. "I give unto them eternal life and they shall never perish" (10:28). "Your fathers did eat manna and are dead. This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof and not die" (6:49, 50).

It belongs to this semi-physical conception of the new life that the Evangelist connects it closely with the sacramental observances of the church. The new birth is effected by "water and the Spirit" (3:5), by the communication of the higher influence in the rite of baptism. By participation in the Lord's Supper the believer is brought into union with Christ and receives of that life which resides in him. This is the obvious meaning of more than one emphatic utterance in the long discourse in the sixth chapter, consequent on the miraculous feeding of the multitude. "Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood ye have no life in you" (6:53). "The bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world" (6:51). It is indeed unjust to impute to the Evangelist the crude sacramental doctrine which had already begun to find its way into the thought of the church. Rightly understood his words contain a protest against it. He insists that the outward rite must have its counterpart in a spiritual process, and that the true communion is fellowship with the living Christ. Yet it is impossible to deny that he attributes a certain efficacy to the rite itself. By his conception of the new life as a kind of higher substance he was compelled to relate it to magical, sacramental agencies. It implied not only a moral, but, if we may so express it, a material change, which could not be effected except by miracle.

In the Fourth Gospel, then, the life which was formerly regarded as future becomes the present possession of those who believe in Christ. To the Evangelist, mere physical death is only a passing incident. The true death is that condition of darkness and privation which is ours by nature and from which we are delivered by Christ. The resurrection consists in the great spiritual change,

the "passing from death to life," which is accomplished in the believer here on earth. This is the ultimate idea that finds expression in the story of the raising of Lazarus. The miracle is a many-sided one, and we cannot sum up its whole significance under any one phrase or formula. But the chief key to its meaning is undoubtedly contained in the dialogue between Martha and Jesus (11:23-26). Martha declares her confidence that Lazarus "will rise again in the resurrection at the last day"; to which Jesus answers, "I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die." In other words, the belief in Christ is itself the resurrection. The believer can rest assured, even in his lifetime, that he has attained to immortality and that the death which overtakes his body is something passing and unreal. "Our friend Lazarus sleepeth, but I go that I may awake him out of sleep" (11:11). The raising of the dead man from his grave is meant only to illustrate and confirm, in a manner palpable to the senses, the true miracle which Christ effects for his people. Believing in him they have life, as a present possession which will remain with them forever.

This is the characteristic view of the Fourth Evangelist and is written large over his whole Gospel. We are surprised, however, to find it combined with another view, similar to that of the early apocalyptic teaching. "The hour is coming when all that are in the graves shall hear his voice and shall come forth—they that have done good unto the resurrection of life, and they that have done evil unto the resurrection of condemnation" (5:28, 29). "This is the Father's will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day (6:39; cf. 6:40, 44, 54). More than once the two different views are brought sharply together in seemingly contradictory fashion. "The hour is coming and now is" (5:25). "Whoso eateth my flesh . . . hath eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (6:54). Various explanations have been suggested to account for this strange blending of opposite conceptions. Some have dismissed the apocalyptic references as additions forced into the text at a later time. Others are willing to

attribute them to the Evangelist himself, but regard them as nothing more than formal concessions which he felt obliged to make to the traditional belief of the church. These conjectures, however, are unnecessary: for while the passages in question are undoubtedly difficult, the contradiction implied in them is more apparent than real. While maintaining that the true life is imparted here and now, the Evangelist allows room for a fuller realization of it in the future. Those who have experienced the resurrection on earth will be made manifest hereafter. Christ will raise them up to an outward glory which will correspond with their inward possession of life.

The doctrine of the new body, which occupies such a central place in the teaching of Paul, is nowhere emphasized in the Fourth Gospel. To a writer who approached Christianity from the side of Greek rather than of Jewish speculation, it no doubt appeared of quite secondary importance, apart from the many difficulties which it involved. Yet there are indications that he accepted the Pauline doctrine, without altogether grasping its real purport. The new body, according to Paul, is to be different from the old—a “spiritual body,” awaiting the believer in heaven. What the Evangelist seems to contemplate is a restoration of the earthly body. Those who hear the voice of the Son of God are to “come forth from their graves,” soul and body being reunited at the last day. The story of the raising of Lazarus, while its main purpose is to reveal Jesus as even now the Life-giver, is meant also to be a sort of prophecy of the miracle he will perform hereafter. Lazarus arises in the body that had been laid in the grave, and its appearance is described in detail, to prove that it was indeed the same body and not another. In this connection, too, we may attach a special significance to the account of Jesus’ own resurrection. The evangelist falls back on the tradition of the empty tomb, and is careful to affirm the identity of the risen with the earthly body. He tells how Jesus overcame the doubts of his disciple by pointing to the marks of the crucifixion, still visible in his hands and side. But while he thus insists that the body was the same, he implies that it had undergone some mysterious transformation. Jesus has become a spiritual being. He enters the

room where the disciples are assembled, "the doors being shut." The body, though it remains the same, has been changed into a finer substance and belongs no more to the material world. In the Fourth Gospel, therefore, we seem to trace the beginnings of that modification of the Pauline doctrine which came to be accepted at a later time, as the orthodox belief of the church. Paul had spoken of a "body of glory," a new and heavenly organism, in which Christ had risen and with which his people would be clothed hereafter. It was assumed by later thinkers that this spiritual body was the earthly one, with its gross elements transmuted and etherealized. Perhaps in the case of the Fourth Evangelist the cruder conception is not altogether due to a misunderstanding of Pauline thought. The belief that the true resurrection takes place in the present life seemed of itself to require that the new body should be identical with the old. There can be no repetition of the decisive change, accomplished once for all in the "birth from above." The dead have already passed through the resurrection, and need only to be awakened, as from a transient sleep.

One difficulty, which had perplexed the mind of Paul more than any other, has ceased to exist for the writer of the Fourth Gospel. Paul lived under the shadow of the primitive expectation that the Parousia was close at hand. From his earliest epistle to his latest, we find him pondering anxiously on the fate of those who might die before the Lord's coming. Would they pass immediately into the new life? Or would they be condemned to some interval of waiting, deprived of conscious existence until the general resurrection? The evangelist, writing a generation afterwards, when the hope of the Parousia had almost spent itself, is able to understand it spiritually. Jesus promises to return to his disciples, but not in a literal sense, with a retinue of angels. He will come back as an inward and abiding presence. The Holy Spirit which will dwell invisibly in the lives of his people, will represent himself and will be one with him. For the Evangelist, therefore, there could be no dark interval between the life on earth and that which will follow. The true Parousia, as he conceived it, was simultaneous with the Lord's resurrection. From that moment he had come again to his disciples, and as they held fellowship with him

in their lives they remained with him, uninterruptedly, after death. To this view of the Parousia there is one apparent exception in the memorable passage at the beginning of the fourteenth chapter: "I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you I will come again and receive you unto myself; that where I am there ye may be also." It seems here to be suggested that Christ has departed from earth to his Father's house, where he prepares an abode for his people. He will come back to them at some appointed time in the future, or perhaps at the hour of death, and give them a place with himself. The words, however, are purposely vague and elusive, and are susceptible of more than one meaning. While Jesus declares that he will return at some future day from his dwelling-place in heaven, he seeks to imply that he is ever present with those that love him. The thought of a local habitation to which he will welcome them merges in that of an inward communion, made possible for them even now. This becomes more and more evident in the light of the discourse that follows. Jesus tells the disciples that he is himself the way and the life. He promises to make his abode with them, and bids them abide in him (14:23; 15:4). He prays "that those whom thou hast given me be with me where I am" (17:24)—in the sense that they should hold continual fellowship with him and "behold his glory." Where the earlier teachers looked for a Parousia, which would mark the entrance of God's people on their inheritance of life, the Evangelist thought of Christ as already present. This inward presence of his in the hearts of his disciples is itself their life.

Thus in the Fourth Gospel the apocalyptic terms and ideas of early Christianity are preserved in form, but are charged with a new and deeper significance. The Evangelist sets out from the conception of a great crisis in which all things will be made new. Christ will return for the salvation of his people. He will raise up the dead to an eternal life, and will receive them unto himself, in the mansions prepared for them in his Father's house. But these traditional beliefs of the church are all presented in such a manner that we almost lose sight of their original meaning. The expected crisis becomes an inward and spiritual one. It takes place, not at some uncertain date in the future, but here and now.

Christ has returned already, manifesting himself to those that love him, and in him they have the resurrection and the life. The abode in heaven which he prepares for them is not a place but a spiritual condition, of enduring fellowship with God through his Son.

It is difficult to say how far this advance on primitive Christian thought was conscious and deliberate. We have the impression continually, while reading the Gospel, that the writer is anxious to make room for the earlier beliefs, and to combine them as far as possible with his own interpretation. He discards all material ideas of the new life, and yet assents to the doctrine of a bodily resurrection. Again and again he describes in terms of futurity the change which is realized, according to his normal view, in the present. He blends the local conception of the abode of the saints with a purely spiritual conception. The attempt has often been made to explain away these and similar inconsistencies, but it is better to accept them as belonging to the peculiar character of the Fourth Gospel. It is the product not of logical thinking but of religious sympathy and intuition. The mind of the writer is open on every side and can respond to aspects of truth which seem in themselves to be mutually exclusive. His own prevailing mood is to regard the new life mystically, as an inward state of communion with God. But he sees a significance also in the ordinary Christian view and allows a place to it in his teaching. The life on which we can enter now will have its true realization elsewhere in the future. These two sides of his thought are both reflected in a single verse of the First Epistle. "Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be; but we know that when he shall appear we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (I John 3:2).

Like Paul, the Evangelist says next to nothing concerning the fate of non-believers. He indeed acquiesces, in a formal and incidental manner, in the common anticipation. "They shall come forth: they that have done good unto the resurrection of life and they that have done evil unto the resurrection of condemnation" (5:28). But the apocalyptic idea of a final judgment, which is here suggested, has in reality become meaningless to him. The

judgment, as he conceives it, is an inward process, consequent on each man's attitude to the light (3:18-21). In the absence of any clear pronouncement we can only conclude that the Evangelist was uncertain, in his own mind, regarding the destiny of those who stood outside of the Christian church. Consistently with his fundamental doctrine he could only infer that in their case the death of the body meant final death. But it may well be that he shrank from this inference, and fell back on the traditional beliefs of the church at large.

*Dürer*

JOHN AND PETER